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Hospitality and nostalgia in Iran

Two families talk about life before and after the revolution

Mashhad, Iran

"Remember, don't talk unless someone speaks to you and if it's a man, don't look at him. Don't laugh and try not to smile."

With these words Hussein rang the doorbell at the house of a judge. Hussein, a Western-trained electrical engineer, spoke fluent English. With the customary hospitality I encountered everywhere during my three-month stay in Iran he offered to show me around, despite my being from the United States — the "Great Satan."

The judge's son was a friend with whom he had participated in the 1979 Revolution and Hussein had asked the family if he could bring me along to lunch.

"Above all, keep that *chador* down over your forehead," Hussein cautioned. "These are very strict and religious Hizbullahis." In Iran, Hizbullahi is a blanket term for civilians who are staunch supporters of the current Islamic regime. They are strongly pro-Khomeini and follow the Ayatollah's interpretation of traditional Shiite Muslim theology.

The door was opened by a model *chador*-wearer, the judge's wife, who held the *chador* across her face so only her eyes showed. In a muffled voice, she invited us in.

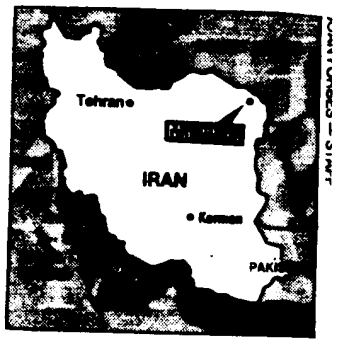
Hussein was welcomed by all the family members in turn, with warm claspings of hands and hugs. Hussein's friend wore an Army uniform — he was a captain on leave from the warfront. Forgetting not to speak before spoken to, I asked how things were going in the nearly five-year-old war between Iran and Iraq.

"Very successfully. We will be winning the war very soon," he replied smoothly, "In spite of that *shaitan* [satan] Saddam [Hussein, the Iraqi President] doing everything he can against us with the support of both superpowers and all the other countries.

"No one is condemning the Iraqis in international forums. *They* attacked us first, after all" he continued. "But we will be victorious because we have something they don't — religious faith. We are ready to die for Islam, but they are just a secular country.

"The American radio says our government forces young boys to go to the front. But this is not true — they volunteer. Every time the Imam [Ayatollah Khomeini] makes an appeal that soldiers are needed, thousands of men sign up all over the country. Just this month, 500 went from here."

Hussein added, "The Western press is always saying our economy is in bad shape also. That's because we have to devote so much of our resources to fighting the war. But you have seen all the produce that's available in the bazaars. Some dissident elements complain about lines for food, but how many have you actually seen?" Only one, I admitted, for fish in the desert city of Kerman.



"Life has improved so much here since the Americans left," Hussein went on. "We were suffering from Westoxication. We were sick of all the Western goods and culture being forced on us to subvert our traditional Islamic Iranian ways.

"What we called our economic development was just showing off. The Shah was trying to imitate the West and traded our oil to import useless things which benefited only the wealthy. 70 percent of our population lives in the countryside. What does a village woman need with designer scarves or European cosmetics?" This perspective on the changes since the Islamic revolution that ousted the monarchy in 1979 was typical of the strong government supporters I met.

The judge's wife, still holding her chador in front of her face, served us pistachio-filled nougats and large, juicy dates as appetizers. She sat down and asked with a big smile, "You married? You children?" and looked disappointed when I said no. She showed me a large picture of Khomeini that she was embroidering. "My husband very, very Hizbullahi," she said proudly. "I, too."

I asked to hear more about Hizbullahis. The judge explained via Hussein that they strictly follow God's rules as set forth in the Koran (the Muslim holy text) and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams or spiritual leaders, and certain highly knowledgeable religious scholars. These rules are comprehensive and cover all areas of life — ranging from the duty of each Muslim to struggle against injustice to matters of dress and manners.

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We then sat down to a vast array of exotic dishes which my hosts apologized for, saying they liked to live simply. With typical Iranian sensitivity to guests' needs, as soon as my plate emptied, a hand would reach over and replenish it. As is polite in Iran, after the leisurely meal was finished, Hussein and I left in a flurry of warm goodbyes.

"There are many things I don't like about your government. But you know, there really should be a resolution of the conflict between our two countries," Hussein said as he dropped me off. "There must be some compromise possible, since they have mutual interests in keeping out the Russians. Maybe the biggest problem is the lack of contact between Iranians and Americans." These words came as a pleasant surprise after his earlier remarks.

Many of the Iranians I met appeared to be caught in the conflict between the rapid Westernization of the 1970s and the reemergence of traditional socio-religious values. These Iranians are religious, but not orthodox, and are used to a Westernized lifestyle. Their position was typified by another family I visited in Shemiran, a well-to-do section of north Tehran, where an Iranian friend had invited me to her cousin's birthday party.

"Can I take your *chador*?" asked the father of the family after I was introduced to the assembled relatives. The younger women wore jeans or Western dresses, and the younger men wore the Commando brand jeans and tennis shoes that have become fashionable since the war.

A beautiful Persian carpet lay over the wall-to-wall carpeting and, as in almost every Iranian home, a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini hung on the wall.

Music played on a cassette recorder. It was the soundtrack from the recent movie hit, "The CIA is the Hand of Satan," said Reza, the 24-year old son. He was the only member of the family who spoke more than a smattering of English.

"I was in America for high school," he explained, showing me an expired California driver's license from seven years ago. "I'm sorry I couldn't go to college there, too, but my mother got very sick so I came home right away. I would really like to go back, but since the Revolution it's become almost impossible for Iranians to get visas for the US."

Reza's mother brought out a photo album and others family members gathered around. "Here is my junior high class in Iran." He pointed sadly to some bright young faces. "This was my good friend who was *shahid* (martyred) in the war two years ago. Also this boy. And this one." He turned the page.

"Here I am at Disneyland . . . here are my sisters at the Caspian Sea before the Revolution." Two of the girls smiled and pointed themselves out, wearing shorts at the beach. He flipped the page and grinned. "Here they are on a family trip last year — what a change." Solemn faces peered out from under yards of black *chador* tightly clasped at their chins.

The talk turned to other subjects — the *hijab*, or Islamic head covering, and family life. One of the sisters said through Reza, "At first it was an inconvenience to put on a *hijab* every time I went out, but you get used to it and soon it becomes second nature. Really, no one even talks about it anymore."

Her cousin, a school teacher, agreed, "I think in the West they make a big deal about the *chador*, but it's been our national dress for centuries. Even during the Shah's time when Iran was so Westernized, most women still wore it. The difference is just that now we have to wear *hijab* by law."

"It seems to us that in the West you don't care about your families," said one woman. "You don't spend enough time with your children, and they leave home as soon as possible. They don't respect their parents and, instead of taking care of them when they get older, they put them away in old people's homes.

"We were beginning to get like that before the Revolution. Our husbands were turning into New York businessmen, rushing around all day long; we were always out shopping for the latest styles; our kids were going to discos. Now that all those distractions have been eliminated, we've gotten back our family closeness. We spend most of our free time visiting relatives and friends."

Another woman said she had the best of both worlds with a sewing business she had started at home. She could work and be with her children at the same time.

But one woman in her early 20s did not seem as pleased with this new trend. "I'm not married or working and most of my family is in another city, so it's rather boring for me these days," she said, taking me aside. "There's nothing to do except sit at home and watch TV but there are only educational and religious programs on now. The cartoons are the most entertaining thing."

This story is part of an occasional series. The writer's name is being withheld to protect future travel plans.